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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000787

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: PATRIARCH SFEIR SEES SLEIMAN'S ELECTION
AS POSITIVE SIGN

REF: BEIRUT 766

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Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) After returning from three weeks overseas, during which Lebanon weathered dramatic events of Hizballah-led fighters in the streets of west Beirut and the election of Michel Sleiman as President, Patriarch Sfeir seemed cautiously upbeat about the political outlook in Lebanon. Sfeir believes the election of Sleiman might indicate a new stage for Lebanese politics. However, he said this new stage depends on achieving unity of the "Christian voice." Sfeir also expressed his gratitude for President Bush's statement of support for Lebanon during their meeting at the White House on May 21. Sfeir supports Fouad Siniora to stay on as Prime Minister because he is a "stable person" who can face the tough political situation that lies ahead (the Parliament elected Siniora later that same day). Sfeir added that he plans to travel with the Pope to Australia in mid-June. End summary.

12. (C) On May 28 the Charge, accompanied by PolOff, visited Maronite Patriarch Sfeir at his residence in Bkirke. The Patriarch had just returned from a three-week overseas trip (May 5 - May 26), which included visits to Qatar, South Africa, the United States and Spain. He said during his trip he met with many of the Lebanese diaspora and found it interesting how many of them were still interested in the current political developments in Lebanon, even though many had not lived in Lebanon "for many years." Sfeir specifically referenced the 35,000 Lebanese that reside and work in Qatar. Sfeir said there is a large Lebanese diaspora in the Gulf states which wants to remain connected and informed on Lebanon developments.

SFEIR UPBEAT AFTER THE ELECTION OF SLEIMAN
AS PRESIDENT

13. (C) Sfeir believes the election of Michel Sleiman as president on May 25 is a real positive sign for Lebanon's political future (reftel). Sfeir hopes Sleiman's election signaled a new stage in Lebanon's politics, leading to further political compromise between the "different communities" within Lebanon. Sfeir said Sleiman's consensus

candidacy can bring balance to a political system that has long been missing a sense of compromise or cooperation.

14. (C) The Charge commented that Michel Sleiman's inaugural speech (reftel) was balanced and, set the right tone for bringing the majority and opposition together on some of the more contentious issues, like cabinet formation and drafting a new electoral law. Sfeir agreed that Sleiman's speech was "balanced" and hoped it would serve as a good basis to begin negotiations between the majority and the opposition.

SFEIR IMPRESSED BY FOREIGN DELEGATION
ATTENDING SLEIMAN'S ELECTION

15. (C) Sfeir said he was surprised by how many high-level foreign dignitaries attended Sleiman's election. Sfeir saw this type of turnout for the election as reassuring and a "good sign" the international community is engaged and supportive of Lebanese democracy. Sfeir also noted the U.S. Congressional delegation that attended the inauguration consisted of three members of Congress of Lebanese descent: Nick Rahall D-WV), Darrell Issa (R-CA) and Ray Lahood (R-IL) (as well as Charlie Melancon (D-LA), John Linder (R-GA), and Jack Kingston R-GA) (reftel)

SFEIR "THANKFUL" FOR MEETING WITH
PRESIDENT BUSH DURING U.S. VISIT

15. (C) Sfeir said he was "thankful" for the opportunity to meet President Bush at the White House on May 21. He said it was a positive meeting, and he was grateful President Bush stated such strong support for Lebanon during his visit. The

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Charge added that Sfeir's meeting with President Bush emphasized the importance Washington put on Lebanon and that it was critical that Sfeir's message of peace and stability needed to be heard in America.

16. (C) Sfeir said he especially enjoyed his visits to Philadelphia and Houston. He commented it was important for him to talk to Lebanese who lived in the U.S. and hear their concerns. Sfeir said there are large Maronite communities in Philadelphia and Houston and meeting with them was a "positive experience." He also noted with pride the honorary degree he received in his visit to Villanova University near Philadelphia. Sfeir hoped that partnerships between U.S. universities and Lebanese education institutions could be established.

"ONE CHRISTIAN VOICE"

17. (C) Sfeir reiterated his concerns about the lack of Christian unity, especially among Christian politicians. While Sfeir said the election of Sleiman marks a step in the right direction in regaining the "Christian voice," it must be "built upon and maintained." Sfeir commented that Lebanon now needs "only one president, not many." He noted it is "not a positive sign" for the Christian community when MP Michel Aoun, Social Affairs Minister and MP Nayla Mouawad, and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea all have different political positions and seem to lack any willingness to cooperate with each other. Sfeir added that political negotiations to determine the cabinet, especially among Christians, may be difficult and slow, but are part of the democratic process. "In Lebanon, sometimes our political system is too democratic" he added.

SINIORA IS THE RIGHT MAN FOR
PM JOB

18. (C) Sfeir believes Fouad Siniora is doing a good job as

Prime Minister and should stay in the position. Sfeir said Siniora has the endurance and the "stable personality" that make him a good candidate for the position. Sfeir noted that MP Saad Hariri's youth and lack of governing experience would not make him best person to take on the role of Prime Minister. Sfeir added that since Hariri was young, 38 years old, he would have other opportunities for the Prime Ministership in the future.

THE PENDULUM SWINGS TOWARDS COOPERATION?

19. (C) Sfeir hopes that the political pendulum is swinging towards political cooperation and away from the use of violence for political gains. He commented in most democratic systems around the world, when two sides do not agree on a certain issue, they try to find an "acceptable solution." However, in Lebanese politics political groups grab their weapons and take to the streets. For this reason, Sfeir hopes Sleiman will select the Minister of Interior position in an attempt to keep the position "neutral." (Note: Under the agreement reached in Doha on May 21, the President is allotted the selection of three cabinet positions. End Note.)

PATRIARCH WILL GO TO AUSTRALIA WITH POPE IN JUNE

10.(C) Sfeir said that he scheduled to travel to Australia in mid-June, accompanying Pope Benedict XVI. Sfeir said the Pope had invited him on the trip and believes it signals the "Holy Father's interest" in Lebanon.

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